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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the effects on reading comprehension of the use of the exclusive pronoun "he" and more or less contrived alternatives. Subjects, 358 students enrolled in an introduction to human communication at a large northeastern university, read three different forms of the same essay. One essay form exclusively used "he," the second used "less contrived" pronouns (s/he, him/her, his/her), and the third used "more contrived" pronouns (ter, tem, tey). Following the reading, students responded to 10 multiple choice questions measuring actual comprehension and 8 additional questions measuring comprehension, dynamism, and worthwhileness of material. Results showed that the more contrived the pronoun form, the more likely it was that college-age students would perceive it as difficult to comprehend. Actual comprehension scores were significantly higher in the exclusive "he" than in the "more contrived" condition, but actual comprehension scores did not differ significantly between the exclusive "he" and the "less contrived" condition. "More contrived" pronoun forms posed more serious comprehension problems for men than for women, but men found the "less contrived" forms easier to comprehend than the women did. (JL)

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Abbreviated Paper*

Evaluating Alternatives to Exclusive 'He'

by

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Rationale

Problems associated with use of the exclusive pronoun "he" necessitate finding alternative third person indefinite pronouns. Over a dozen studies demonstrate that usage of exclusive "he" is associated with predominate perceptions of male referents (Todd-Mancillas, 1981). What is less clear is which among the many suggested alternatives are the preferred alternatives. Basically, the suggested alternatives fall into two categories depending on the degree of similarity to exclusive "he" and other existing pronouns. One category of alternatives may be described as "less contrived," i.e., composites of already existing pronouns arranged to make explicit their intended referencing of both men and women, e.g., he or she, s/he, him/her, her or his, one. A second category of alternatives may be described as "more contrived," neologisms not previously familiar to English users which require more effort to understand and to use in their intended manner, e.g., tey (he or she), tem (him or her), and ter (her or his).

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The "less contrived" alternatives are by far the more frequently used alternatives. However, some authors insist on using the "more contrived" alternatives, with the assumption that conspicuousness will draw attention to our culture's long history of treating the sexes differently (unfairly). To draw attention to this discrepancy will, presumably, increase the probability of our being sensitive to alternative (equitable) practices (Blaubergs, 1978).

Until now, people have opted for one form of alternative pronouns over others largely on the basis of individual preferences, guesses about what seems to be easiest to implement, and what conveys most accurately the intended meaning. To date, no study has determined whether usage of these forms affects reading comprehension or other important factors. This presents a problem that must be addressed, for innovations are sometimes associated with unforeseen consequences perhaps as problematic as the condition they are intended to resolve (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Further, since even slight modifications in style may affect actual or perceived reading comprehension (Hafner, 1977), it would seem necessary to conduct studies assessing whether usage of "less" and "more contrived" alternatives affect comprehension. The diffusion-of-innovations literature would allow us to make some reasonable predictions. Innovations are the most likely to be adopted and least likely to be associated with negative consequences if they are similar to the behavior being replaced (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Thus, among exclusive "he," "less," and "more contrived" pronoun forms, one can predict:

H_1 Messages with exclusive "he" will be more easily comprehended and reported as easier to comprehend than materials written with either "less" or "more contrived" alternatives.

H_2 Messages with "less contrived" pronoun alternatives will be more easily comprehended and reported as easier to comprehend than materials written with "more contrived" alternatives.

Additional inspection of the literature discloses differences between college-age women and men in their actual and perceived comprehension of written messages. From a study of UCLA students, MacKay (1980) reports that women perceive materials using exclusive "he" as much less personally relevant than men do. Conversely, MacKay reports that men perceive materials using plural pronouns (they) as somewhat less personally relevant. The use of plural pronouns has been suggested as one acceptable alternative to using exclusive "he" and, as discussed in this paper, would be subsumed in the "less contrived" inclusive pronoun category. One can speculate that if "less contrived" pronoun forms are perceived as less personally relevant for male than female college students, then the "more contrived" pronoun forms would be perceived as even less personally relevant for male than female college students. Further, presuming that perceptions of personal relevance are associated with increased attentiveness and actual or perceived ease in comprehension, than one can posit the following sex difference hypotheses:

H_3 College-age male students will comprehend or perceive to comprehend less easily than will female students those materials using "less" or "more contrived" pronouns.

H_4 Further, within-sex comparisons will indicate that actual and perceived comprehension scores will differ more for men than women when contrasting the exclusive "he" and "most contrived" conditions.

The following study was done to test the above hypotheses.

Method

Three different forms of an essay on the history of magic were randomly distributed to 358 students enrolled in an introduction to human communication course at a large northeastern university. The essay was adapted from one that

had already been developed for use in college reading programs (Fry, 1975). One essay form used exclusive "he," the second used "less contrived" pronouns (s/he, him/her, his/her), and the third used "more contrived" pronouns (ter, tem, tey). Following the reading, students responded to 10 multiple choice (a-e) questions measuring actual comprehension and 8 additional questions measuring perceived comprehension, dynamism, and worthwhileness of material. Seven proctors were available to monitor carefully subjects' adherence to all instructions. Data was analyzed using 2 x 3 fixed effects analysis of variance tests (alpha = .05) and follow-up Student t-tests (alpha = .01).

Results

Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Analysis of variance tests indicated significant main effects for the language condition of both actual ($F = 3.58$; $df = 2/353$; $p < .05$) and perceived ($F = 8.78$; $df = 2/313$; $p < .05$) comprehension scores. Subsequent t-tests indicated that neither actual ($t = 1.65$; $df = 313$; $p > .05$) nor perceived ($t = .89$; $df = 313$; $p > .05$) comprehension scores differed significantly between the exclusive "he" and "less contrived" pronoun conditions. However, as predicted, both actual ($t = 2.60$; $df = 352$; $p < .01$) and perceived ($t = 3.89$; $df = 313$; $p < .01$) comprehension scores were significantly higher in the exclusive "he" (actual $\bar{X} = 7.39$; perceived $\bar{X} = 3.37$) than "more contrived" conditions (respective means = 6.87, 2.67).

Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. Although in the predicted direction, actual comprehension scores did not differ significantly between the "less contrived" ($\bar{X} = 7.10$) and "more contrived" ($\bar{X} = 6.87$) conditions ($t = 1.10$; $df = 352$; $p > .01$). However, as predicted, the "less contrived" condition ($\bar{X} = 3.37$) was perceived as significantly easier to comprehend than the "more contrived" ($\bar{X} = 2.83$) condition ($t = 3.00$; $df = 313$; $p < .01$).

Hypothesis 3 was not supported. Analysis of variance tests indicated a significant subject sex-by-language condition interaction for actual comprehension scores ($F = 3.83$; $df = 2/352$; $p > .05$), but a nonsignificant subject sex-by-language condition interaction for perceived comprehension scores ($F = .89$; $df = 2/313$; $p > .05$). Accordingly, subsequent t-tests were conducted to clarify the significant interaction effect on actual comprehension.

In the "more contrived" condition, and although in the predicted direction, men's ($\bar{X} = 6.69$) comprehension scores did not differ significantly from women's ($\bar{X} = 7.05$) comprehension scores ($t = 1.24$; $df = 352$; $p > .01$). However, contrary to what was hypothesized, in the "less contrived" condition, men's ($\bar{X} = 7.42$) comprehension scores were significantly higher than women's ($\bar{X} = 6.78$) comprehension scores ($t = 2.56$; $df = 352$; $p < .01$).

Hypotheses 4 was partially supported. Because analysis of variance tests indicated a significant subject sex-by-language interaction for actual comprehension scores but not for perceived comprehension, follow-up t-tests were conducted on the actual comprehension data only. For males only, and as hypothesized, actual comprehension scores were higher in the exclusive "he" ($\bar{X} = 7.42$) than "more contrived" ($\bar{X} = 6.69$) conditions ($t = 2.52$; $df = 352$; $p < .01$).

Unplanned Comparisons: Perceptions of Dynamism and Worthwhileness of Written Materials. Analysis of variance tests failed to indicate significant main or interaction effects on either of these dependent variables. Consequently, these data were not further analyzed.

Discussion/Conclusions

Three of the four hypotheses were partially supported, and these results have clear implications for identifying the preferred alternative pronoun form. Support for hypotheses 1 and 2 indicate that in general the more contrived the pronoun form, the more likely it is that college-age students will perceive it

as difficult to comprehend. More important, actual comprehension scores were significantly higher in the exclusive "he" than in the "more contrived" condition, but actual comprehension scores did not differ significantly between the exclusive "he" and "less contrived" condition.

Partial support for hypothesis 4 indicates that usage of "more contrived" pronoun forms poses more serious comprehension problems for men than for women. This finding is compatible with previous findings that women seem better able to adapt to novel pronoun forms than men (MacKay, 1981).

It is not clear why hypothesis 3 was not supported, nor is it clear why men would find the "less contrived" pronoun forms significantly easier to comprehend than women. However, this unanticipated finding does not point to a difficulty in adopting "less contrived" pronoun forms and merely suggests that men may find it easier to adapt to this form than women.

Because evidence obtained here shows that "more contrived" pronoun forms are associated with significant actual and perceived reductions in comprehension, the use of this pronoun form should be avoided. Further, because "less contrived" pronoun alternatives were not similarly associated with significant reductions in actual or perceived comprehension, their use is preferred over the "more contrived" forms. Subsequent research should attempt to replicate these findings and, whenever possible, implement other examples of "less" and "more contrived" pronoun forms other than those used in this study. This would help to generalize and make more tenable these findings and conclusions.

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